DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 034 664 RE 002 329

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TITLE Beginning Readers for Speakers of Divergent Dialects.
PUB DATE May 69
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the International Reading Association conference, Kansas City, Mo., Apr. 30-May 3, 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.55
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Reading, Child Language, Culturally Disadvantaged, *Disadvantaged Youth, *Language Patterns, Linguistic Patterns, *Nonstandard Dialects, Reading Difficulty, *Reading Materials, Social Dialects, Syntax

ABSTRACT

Linguistic interference as a key factor in the acquisition of reading skills by inner-city black children is explored. Examples of syntactic and phonetic structures in the black dialect which are different from standard English and the role these differences play in beginning reading are given. The use of dialect-based texts allows the child to learn to read with familiar language patterns; therefore, it is recommended that dialect-based texts rather than experience charts be used as the first readers for Negro nonstandard English speakers. Through use of these texts, vocabulary can be controlled, and it will not be necessary to rely upon the teacher's knowledge of the dialect. Transition texts that move from nonstandard to standard English may also be provided. (CM)

NOV 18 1969

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BEGINNING READERS FOR SPEAKERS OF DIVERGENT DIALECTS*

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Teaching children to read, write and cipher has been the chief goal of public school education since it was begun in this country.

It is becoming increasingly more evident that our schools, most especially our urban ghetto schools, are failing miserably in their attempt to produce a literate student body. With the increasing frustration of these ghetto youths and the increasing demands for highly trained workers in our technological society the failure of our schools has become a national crisis.

The question then is why are we suddenly unable to educate these children? The first and most obvious response is that we have not "suddenly failed" to educate these children; if anything, we have suddenly become interested in educating them. The expansion of the concept "education for all" to include large portions of the black community is a relatively new phenomenon. And it is just recently that we are realizing our dismal failure in our initial attempts at universal education in the United States.

But why is it that in our efforts to expand education to a larger sector of the Negro community we have failed?

One immediate answer, an answer quite often articulated by the black militants who want "community control" of their neighborhood schools is simple--"Whitey doesn't want to educate us." This response fits nicely into the oppression

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*Presented at IRA, Kansas City, Missouri, 1969.

model of behavior--the solution to oppression is to remove it--i.e. black power, community control of schools--but it is not sufficient. Political solutions are not educational solutions.

The answer is not so simple. Many of the white teachers do not go into the schools hating and fearing Negroes, nor do they go in determined to mark time in the classroom so as to keep the black child ignorant. Quite often the white teachers are more accepting of the black, slum children than are the black teachers who sometimes view these children as innately stupid, nasty and a "bad reflection on the race." Indeed, in general the success of the black teachers is not inordinately higher than the white teachers. (Militants may wish to argue that the black teacher is a victim of the system, that the white power structure prevents her from doing her job, etc. but we shall save that debate for another time).

Let me just say this, the white or black teacher., regardless of her attitudes towards the children, does go into the classroom to "ply her trade." When she first enters the classroom she does intend to teach these children in the best way she knows how. Herein lies that problem, "the best way she knows how" has no relevance to the children that she is teaching.

The teacher does as good a job as she knows how to do, she works with curricula and materials which she knows works with other children, and she watches them fail in her classroom. Given this situation, she has several alternatives: 1) to deny they are actually failing (thus, Miss Brown's Teacher Inventory indicates that her students are at grade level at the end of 2nd grade and then the following Fall, Miss Smith finds this is not the case at all); 2) to assume that the children are innately uneducable because the "tried and true" methods haven't worked;

3) to assume that the children can't learn because of their alleged pernicious home environments or 4) to assume there is something wrong with her method and materials that interferes with the ghetto child's learning to read.

Only alternatives 3 and 4 allow for relevant discussion in terms of creating a reading program that will allow ghetto youngsters to learn to read. Alternative 3 postulates some kind of pathology in the home environment which then interferes with the teacher's attempts to educate the youngster. One of the alledged problems of the home frequently refered to concerns the child's achieving the proper attitude towards school that will allow him to be successfu. A great deal of the literature deals with "motivation" as it relates to the child's attitudes towards school, and the mother's participation in the child's school experiences. Over and over we find attestations of the fact that the child is told simply to mind the teacher (rather than to go to school and learn because learning is fun and exciting--an attitude which many educators seem to think is relevant to school achievement). Although many mothers articulate high goals for their children, these same mothers do not participate in PTA and other school related activities and thus educators come to see the mothers as insincere in their goals for their children. Since books are not prevalent around the ghetto home and most members of the ghetto community are not library habitues, many educators assume, ergo, these children are not interested or properly motivated to learn to read! Of course there is no research to substantiate these assumptions on the part of educators. I have yet to meet the first or second grader who was not sincerely interested in gaining his teacher's approval. Nor have I met the primary school child who has recognized that reading has no relationship to his life-style and therefore rejects efforts to teach him

reading skills. What the children may reject is what the current teaching methods and materials tell him about himself, this is very different from rejecting reading per se. By denying the legitimacy of the child's linguistic system, the school currently teaches him that his language, and therefore himself, is no good, inferior and not the way a good big boy is supposed to behave. That concept is what the child rejects!

I think the crux of the reading problems in ghetto schools lies in alternative 4--THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE PRESENT METHOD AND MATERIALS. We do not have reading failure in the classic sense. Wiener and Cromer in their article in the Harvard Educational Review discussed at some length the difference between a reading problem and a language problem. They stressed the need to determine the relationship between language differences and reading problems since a failure to be explicit about the relationship between reading and previously acquired auditory language often leads to ambiguities as to whether a particular difficulty is a reading problem, language problem, or both.

The question then arises as to what the language differences in the speech of ghetto black children are, and what role they play in the acquisition of reading skills. The purpose of the present paper is to demonstrate that the dialect of Negro non-standard children is sufficiently divergent from standard English so as to cause difficulty for children who are attempting to learn to read in a dialect which is not similar to the dialect that they speak. Thus, the reading failure results from what Labov has described as 1) "the ignorance of standard English rules" on the part of the potential readers on the one hand, and 2) "the ignorance of non-standard English rules on the part of teachers and text writers" on the other hand.

I would first like to illustrate how some of the current reading materials for beginning instruction come into conflict with the rules of the system that the ghetto child uses. A typical beginning reading approach involves many hours spent in "auditory discrimination" or phonics, where the child is supposed to be able to make the distinction between the various sounds that occur in the language he is learning to read. Many a phonic book spends time having the child learn the difference between /i/ and /ɛ/. A distinction which is not present in the speech of Negro non-standard speakers when the /i/ or /ɛ/ precedes a nasal sound as in /pin/ which in non-standard could mean either an instrument with a sharp point that one uses to hem up a dress, or an instrument with a sharp point that one uses to write with. Similarly, a good deal of time is spent in phonics books identifying initial, medial and final sounds--some of these sounds do not occur in non-standard final position--for example, the /d/ in <u>hand</u> is not present in non-standard /hæn/. These are just a few of the many examples that can be found which illustrate the difference between the phonics book and the reality of the child.

However, more prominent differences begin to occur when the child is past initial word recognition and begins to deal with the language of the primer. Here the differences in syntax between the child and the printed page create great problems. Among the prominent syntactic differences are the following: 1) the absence of the copula in the child's speech, thus, we get "Leroy big." where the primer might put "Leroy is big." (actually the primer would probably say Susie, or Bobby or some other name that is very infrequent in the black community) 2) the absence of a marker of third person singular, thus we get "Henry see

Spot." for Henry sees spot. 3) a difference in verb agreement so that the child says "She have a dog." where the primer is likely to say She has a dog. 4) a different rule for the indefinite article so the child says "I got a apple" where the primer is likely to say I have an apple. This is just a small list of the many differences that exist. Of course, there are also some structures that are frequent in the child's language that do not appear in standard English--the be form as in He be busy--and thus a familiar construction such as this never is presented to the child in his initial attempts at deciphering the printed code.

Because of these differences between the child's system and that of the printed page it is the contention of this paper that beginning reading materials must be presented in the child's system. First he must be taught to read, and then he can be taught to read standard English. Shuy has discussed three general principles concerning beginning readers for dialect speakers:

1. The grammatical choices should not provide extraneous data...the text should help the child by avoiding grammatical forms which are not realized by him in his spoken language.

2. The grammatical choices should provide adequate data. In the case of beginning reading materials for non-standard speakers, grammatical forms which occur in non-standard but not in standard should be inserted where they appear natural (the be in "All the time he be happy", and the to in "Make him to do it", for example).

3. The grammatical choices should provide sequentially relevant data. In the case of beginning reading materials for non-standard speakers, syntactic constructions such as adverbial phrases should be reduced to their derivative nominalized forms where it is natural to do so in the dialect (the as a janitor in the sentence, "Samuel's brother is working as a janitor", for example, (would be) reduced to "Samuel brother, he a janitor".).

But where is the evidence that linguistic interference is the factor that is preventing these children from learning to read. First I would like to present the

theoretical basis. In 1953, the UNESCO report regarding the role of language in education stated that: "It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar medium." Since 1953 studies employing the recommendations of the UNESCO report have clearly illustrated the importance of considering the vernacular in teaching reading in the national tongue. This has not only been demonstrated when the national tongue and the mother tongue were two different languages but has also been shown in regard to literacy in a dialect that is different from the one that the child speaks. See the work done in Sweden by Tore Osterberg. I submit that the situation with black children in the United States is similar to the literacy problems of India, Africa, Sweden, Puerto Rico, etc.

Linguistic interference is clearly here. I will present two examples of it, one anecdotal and the other research data. The first has to do with my two children, Jennifer, age four, and Sharon, age 3, who were playing with Ollie, a 10 year old Negro non-standard speaker from Washington, D.C. The girls were putting on plays that Ollie was directing. They had "sold" tickets and my husband and I were the audience for a performance of Jack and Jill. Jennifer was Jill, Sharon was Jack, and Ollie was the producer, director and narrator. As Ollie intoned "Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water", Jennifer and Sharon proceded up the hallway carrying an Easter basket which was serving

as a pail. "Jack fell down and broke his crown"--with that line "Jack" did a somersault and then picked up the Easter basket, removed a large preschool crayon and broke it in half--"and Jill came tumbling after." The interference here is obvious--to Ollie, crown and crayon were homophones and crayon was the word that was more frequent in his vocabulary so he presumed it was the word in the nursery rhyme. Nursery rhymes aren't supposed to make too much sense anyway!

The second example of interference involves a research study where black third grade students were asked to repeat exactly what they heard on a tape when sentences in standard and Negro non-standard English were presented to them. When the child heard a sentence such as I don't know if I can go to the movies. he responded in non-standard I don't know can I go to the movies, however, when presented the non-standard sentence That girl she don't have no clothes to wear the child responded with That girl she don't have no clothes. to wear. On the other hand white, more standard English speaking children when presented with the same task performed the same way but instead of translating the standard into non-standard, they translated the non-standard into standard so that in response to I don't know can I go the white child responded with I don't know if I can go. Clearly, the child's own system was competing with the "foreign" system that was being presented.

But one might ask, why doesn't more of that interference show up on oral reading performance. Probably the most obvious answer is that in order to test a child in oral reading he has to have attained a reading proficiency which precludes many of the children we are talking about--the non-readers. Or, one has to test a child who by the third grade has finally attained some proficiency with primer

material. The best way to determine the extent of the interference factor is to teach the child to read initially in his dialect.

The work of the Craft project in New York clearly indicated that by the third grade, the time when the grammar in the texts really begins to be complex, children who were presented initial reading materials in the experience chart manner--i.e. the child's own language and grammatical system--were significantly better readers than the children who had been given the basal readers.

Because of the divergence between the standard basal readers and the child's language, I am suggesting that dialect based texts be used as the first readers for Negro non-standard speakers.

These texts should represent the grammar of the child. The orthography of these texts should be in standard English orthography, since standard English orthography fits equally well--or equally poorly--standard or Negro non-standard speech.

The use of dialect based texts allows the child to learn to read something that he is already familiar with. In addition, the advantage of the dialect text over the experience chart, or as the next step is that a) vocabulary can be controlled, b) one doesn't have to rely upon the teacher's knowledge of the dialect (which is necessary or else she is liable to "fill in" on the experience chart--i.e. she hears "John, he run after Mary" as "John runs after Mary.") and c) transition texts may be provided that move from non-standard English into standard English so that the child may learn the rules as he procedes.